

Nestor Makhno

The Man and the Myth

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Nestor Ivanovich Makhno, the anarchist partisan leader, was among the most colorful and heroic figures of the Russian Revolution and Civil War. His movement in the Ukraine represents one of the few occasions in history when anarchists controlled a large territory for an extended period of time. For more than a year he was a greater power on the steppe than either Trotsky or Denikin. A born military leader, he fought simultaneously on several fronts, opposing Reds as well as Whites, Austrian invaders and Ukrainian nationalists, not to speak of the countless bands of irregulars who crossed and recrossed the steppe in search of plunder and booty. According to Victor Serge, he was a "strategist of unsurpassed ability," whose peasant army possessed a "truly epic capacity for organization and battle." Emma Goldman called him "the most picturesque and vital figure brought to the fore by the Revolution in the South."¹

Makhno was born on October 27, 1889, of a poor peasant family in the Ukrainian settlement of Gulyai-Polye, situated in Ekaterinoslav province between the Dnieper River and the Sea of Azov. He was barely a year old when his father died, leaving five small boys to the care of their mother. As a child of seven, Makhno was put to work tending cows and sheep for the local peasantry; he later found employment as a farm laborer and as a worker in a foundry. In 1906, at the age of seventeen, Makhno joined an anarchist group in Gulyai-Polye. Two years later he was brought to trial for participating in a terrorist attack that claimed the life of a district police officer. The court sentenced him to be hanged, but because of Makhno's youth this was commuted to an indefinite period in the Butyrki prison in Moscow. Makhno proved a refractory inmate, unable to accept the discipline of prison life, and during the nine years of his detention he was often placed in irons or in solitary confinement. For a time, however, he shared a cell with an older, more experienced anarchist named Peter Arshinov, who taught him the elements of libertarian doctrine and confirmed him in the faith of Bakunin and Kropotkin.

Released from prison after the February Revolution of 1917, Makhno returned to his native village and assumed a leading role in community affairs. He helped organize a union of farm laborers and served as its chairman. Before long, he was elected chairman of the local union of carpenters and metalworkers and also of the Gulyai-Polye Soviet of Workers' and Peasants'

¹ Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901-1941* (London, 1963), p. 121; Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (London, 1915), p- 166.

Deputies. In August 1917, as head of the soviet, Makhno recruited a band of armed peasants and set about expropriating the estates of the neighboring gentry and distributing the land to the peasants. From that time, the villagers began to regard him as a new Stenka Razin or Emelian Pugachev, sent to realize their ancient dream of land and liberty.

Makhno's activities, however, came to a halt the following spring, when the Soviet government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and a large force of German and Austrian troops marched into the Ukraine. Makhno shared the indignation of his fellow anarchists at this compromise with German "imperialism," but his band of partisans was too weak to offer effective resistance. Forced into hiding, he made his way to the Volga River, then proceeded north to Moscow, where he arrived in June 1918.

During his short visit to the capital, Makhno had an inspiring audience with his idol, Peter Kropotkin, an encounter movingly described in Makhno's memoirs. He was also received in the Kremlin by Lenin, who sounded him out on the attitude of the Ukrainian peasantry towards the Bolsheviks, the military situation in the south, and the differences between the Bolshevik and anarchist conceptions of the revolution. "The majority of anarchists think and write about the future," Lenin declared, "without understanding the present. That is what divides us Communists from them." Though the anarchists were "selfless" men, Lenin went on, their "empty fanaticism" blurred their vision of present and future alike. "But I think that you, comrade," he said to Makhno, "have a realistic attitude towards the burning evils of the time. If only one-third of the anarchist-communists were like you, we Communists would be ready, under certain well-known conditions, to join with them in working towards a free organization of producers." Makhno retorted that the anarchists were not Utopian dreamers but realistic men of action. After all, he reminded Lenin, it was the anarchists and Socialist Revolutionaries, rather than the Bolsheviks, who were beating back the nationalists and privileged classes in the Ukraine, "Perhaps I am mistaken," answered Lenin, who then offered to help Makhno return to the south.²

When Makhno returned to Gulyai-Polye in July 1918, the area was occupied by Austrian troops and by the militia of their Ukrainian puppet, Hetman Skoropadsky. Organizing a band of partisans under the anarchist banner, Makhno launched a series of raids against the Austrians and Hetmanites and against the manors of the nobility. Extraordinary mobility and a bag of clever tricks constituted Makhno's chief tactical devices. Traveling on horseback and in light peasant carts (*tachanki*) on which machine guns were mounted, his men moved swiftly across the steppe between the Dnieper and the Sea of Azov, swelling into a small army as they went and inspiring terror in their adversaries.

Previously independent guerrilla bands accepted Makhno's command and rallied behind his black banner. Villagers provided food and fresh horses, enabling the Makhnovists to travel forty or fifty miles a day with little difficulty. Turning up quite suddenly where least expected, they would attack the gentry and military garrisons, then vanish as quickly as they had come. In captured uniforms they infiltrated the enemy's ranks to learn their plans or to open fire at point-blank range. On one occasion, Makhno and his retinue, masquerading as Hetmanite guardsmen, gained entry to a landowner's ball and fell upon the guests in the midst of their festivities. When cornered, the Makhnovists would bury their weapons, make their way singly back to their villages, and take up work in the fields, awaiting a signal to unearth a new cache of arms and spring up again in an unexpected quarter. For Isaac Babel, in *Red Cavalry Tales*, Makhno was "as

² N. Makhno, *Pod udarami kontr-revoliutsii* (aprel'-iun' 1918 g.) (Paris, 1936), p. 93.

protean as nature herself. Haycarts deployed in battle array take towns, a wedding procession approaching the headquarters of a district executive committee suddenly opens a concentrated fire, a little priest, waving above him the black flag of anarchy, orders the authorities to serve up the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, wine and music. An army of tachankas possesses undreamed-of possibilities of maneuver."³

Small, agile, well-knit, Makhno was a resourceful leader who combined an iron will with a sense of humor, winning the unswerving devotion of his followers. In September 1918, after defeating a superior force of Austrians at the village of Dibrivki, his men gave him the affectionate title of bat'ko, their "little father." Two months later, the end of the First World War led to the withdrawal of Austrian and German troops from Russian territory. Makhno managed to seize some of their arms and equipment. He next turned his wrath upon the followers of the Ukrainian nationalist leader Petliura. At the end of December, he succeeded in dislodging the Petliurist garrison from Ekaterinoslav. His troops, with their weapons concealed inside their clothing, rode into the central railway station on an ordinary passenger train, took the nationalists by surprise, and drove them from the city. The next day, however, the enemy reappeared with reinforcements, and Makhno was compelled to flee across the Dnieper and return to his base in Gulyai-Polye. The Petliurists, in turn, were evicted by the Red Army shortly afterwards.

During the first five months of 1919, the Gulyai-Polye region was virtually free of political authority. The Austrians, Hetmanites, and Petliurists had all been driven away, and neither the Reds nor the Whites were strong enough to fill the void. Makhno took advantage of this lull to attempt to reconstruct society on libertarian lines. In January, February, and April, the Makhnovists held a series of Regional Congresses of Peasants, Workers, and Insurgents to discuss economic and military matters and to supervise the task of reconstruction.

The question which dominated the Regional Congresses was that of defending the area from those who might seek to establish their control over it. The Second Congress, meeting on February 12, 1919, voted in favor of "voluntary mobilization," which in reality meant outright conscription, as all able-bodied men were required to serve when called up. The delegates also elected a Regional Military Revolutionary Council of Peasants, Workers, and Insurgents to carry out the decisions of the periodic congresses. The new council encouraged the election of "free" Soviets in the towns and villages -- that is, Soviets from which members of political parties were excluded. Although Makhno's aim in setting up these bodies was to do away with political authority, the Military Revolutionary Council, acting in conjunction with the Regional Congresses and the local Soviets, in effect formed a loose-knit government in the territory surrounding Gulyai-Polye.

Like the Military Revolutionary Council, the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine, as the Makhnovist forces were called, was in theory subject to the supervision of the Regional Congresses. In practice, however, the reins of authority rested with Makhno and his staff. Despite his efforts to avoid anything that smacked of regimentation, Makhno appointed his key officers (the rest were elected by the men themselves) and subjected his troops to the stern military discipline traditional among the Cossack legions of the nearby Zaporozhian region. Yet the Insurgent Army never lost its plebeian character. All its officers were peasants or, in a few cases, factory or shop workers. One looks in vain for a commander who sprang from the upper or middle classes, or even from the radical intelligentsia.

³ Isaac Babel, "Discourse on the Tachanka," *The Collected Stories* (Cleveland, 1960), pp. 83-86. I have altered the translation slightly.

For a time, Makhno's dealings with the Bolsheviks remained friendly, and the Soviet press extolled him as a "courageous partisan" and revolutionary leader. Relations were at their best in March 1919, when Makhno and the Communists concluded a pact for joint military action against the Volunteer Army of General Denikin. According to the agreement, the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine became a division of the Red Army, subject to the orders of the Bolshevik supreme command but retaining its own officers and internal structure, as well as its name and black banner.

Such gestures, however, could not conceal the underlying hostility between the two groups. The Communists had little taste for the autonomous status of the Insurgent Army or for the powerful attraction it exerted on their own peasant recruits. The Makhnovists, on their side, feared that sooner or later the Red Army would attempt to bring their movement to heel. As friction increased, the Soviet newspapers abandoned their eulogies of the Makhnovists and began to attack them as "bandits." In April 1919 the Third Regional Congress of Peasants, Workers, and Insurgents met in defiance of a ban placed on it by the Soviet authorities. In May two Cheka agents sent to assassinate Makhno were caught and executed. The final breach occurred when the Makhnovists called a Fourth Regional Congress for June 15 and invited the soldiers of the Red Army to send representatives. Trotsky, commander in chief of the Bolshevik forces, was furious. On June 4 he banned the congress and outlawed Makhno. Communist troops carried out a lightning raid on Gulyai-Polye and dissolved the agricultural communes set up by the Makhnovists. A few days later, Denikin's forces arrived and completed the job, liquidating the local Soviets as well.

The shaky alliance was hastily resumed that summer, when Denikin's drive towards Moscow sent both the Communists and the Makhnovists reeling. During August and September Makhno's guerrillas were pushed back towards the western borders of the Ukraine. On September 26, however, Makhno launched a successful counterattack at the village of Peregonovka, near Uman, cutting the White general's supply lines and creating panic and disorder in his rear. This was Denikin's first serious reverse in his advance into the Russian heartland and an important factor in halting his drive towards the Bolshevik capital. By the end of the year, a counteroffensive by the Red Army had forced Denikin to beat a retreat to the shores of the Black Sea.

At the end of 1919, Makhno received instructions from the Red command to transfer his troops to the Polish front. The order was plainly designed to draw the Insurgent Army away from its home territory, leaving it open to the establishment of Bolshevik rule. Makhno refused to budge. Trotsky, he said, wanted to replace Denikin's forces with the Red Army and the dispossessed landlords with political commissars. Having vowed to cleanse Russia of anarchism "with an iron broom,"⁴ Trotsky replied by again outlawing the Makhnovists. There ensued eight months of bitter struggle, with losses heavy on both sides. A severe typhus epidemic augmented the toll of victims. Badly outnumbered, Makhno's partisans avoided pitched battles and relied on the guerrilla tactics they had perfected in more than two years of civil war.

Hostilities were broken off in October 1920, when Baron Wrangel, Denikin's successor in the south, launched a major offensive, striking northwards from the Crimea. Once more the Red Army enlisted Makhno's aid, in return for which the Communists agreed to an amnesty for all anarchists in Russian prisons and guaranteed the anarchists freedom of propaganda on condition that they refrain from calling for the overthrow of the Soviet government.

⁴ P. A. Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement (1918-1921)* (Detroit and Chicago, 1974), p. 121; Volin: *The*

Barely a month later, however, the Red Army had made sufficient gains to ensure victory in the Civil War, and the Soviet leaders tore up their agreement with Makhno. Not only had the Makhnovists outlived their usefulness as a military partner, but as long as the bat'ko was at large the spirit of anarchism and the danger of a peasant rising would remain to haunt the Bolshevik regime. On November 25, 1920, Makhno's commanders in the Crimea, fresh from their victory over Wrangel, were seized by the Red Army and shot. The next day, Trotsky ordered an attack on Makhno's headquarters in Gulyai-Polye, during which Makhno's staff were captured and imprisoned or shot on the spot. The bat'ko himself, however, together with a remnant of an army that had once numbered in the tens of thousands, managed to elude his pursuers. After wandering over the Ukraine for the better part of a year, the guerrilla leader, exhausted and suffering from unhealed wounds, crossed the Dniester River into Rumania and eventually found his way to Paris.

Given his colorful personality and the rich drama of his career, it is small wonder that Makhno should be the subject of a growing literature. Until recently, however, accounts of his movement, with few exceptions, consisted of mixtures of fact and fiction, of hostile, sometimes vicious polemics, of sensationalist journalism or uncritical, romanticized portraits verging on hagiography. Perhaps it is inevitable that a glamorous and controversial figure of Makhno's stamp should lend himself to such treatment. To a degree, the problem stems from incomplete source material. The journals and manifestoes of the Makhno movement are hard to come by, having been in great part lost or destroyed in the turmoil of the Civil War. What is more, the relevant documents in Soviet archives remain inaccessible to Western specialists. Nor, to my knowledge, have the archives of Makhno's associate Volin (held by his sons in Paris) been made available to the scholar, though they are bound to include important material. Yet, for all these limitations, the sources are considerable and remain to be exhaustively tapped.

What do these sources include? To begin with, we have Makhno's personal memoirs through December 1918, published in a three-volume edition between 1929 and 1937, the last two volumes edited with prefaces and notes by Volin.⁵ In addition, eleven Makhnovist proclamations were preserved by Ugo Fedeli, an Italian anarchist who obtained them in the 1920s during visits to Moscow, Berlin, and Paris, where he became personally acquainted with Makhno. These proclamations have been published in the original Russian and are also included in the English edition of Peter Arshinov's history of the Makhnovist movement.⁶ Further archival materials, to be mentioned again later, are to be found in the Tcherikower Collection of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York. Moreover, Soviet histories and documentary collections, though invariably hostile and of limited worth, contain useful information, as do articles on Makhno in Soviet academic journals. Beyond this, additional documents and photographs remain in the hands of Makhno's surviving comrades in France and other countries. There are also the scattered files of Makhnovist newspapers in Western libraries, interviews with participants in the Insurgent Army and with people who knew Makhno in exile, the eyewitness histories of Arshinov and Volin, and the secondary accounts by David Footman, Michael Palij, and others.

Unknown Revolution, 1917-1921 (Detroit and Chicago, 1974), pp. 307-308.

⁵ N. Makhno, *Ruskaia revoliutsiia na Ukraine (ot marta 1917 g. po april' 1918 g.)*; *Pod udarami kontr-revoliutsii (april'-iiun 1918 g.)*; *Ukrainskaia revoliutsiia (iiul'-dekabr' 1918 g.)*; reprinted in a one-volume edition in 1977. Volume 1 has been translated into French, German, Spanish, and Italian.

⁶ "Proclamations of the Machno Movement, 1920," *International Review of Social History*, 1968, part 2; Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, pp. 265-84. Fedeli was himself the author of a short but useful study of the

To date, however, there has been no comprehensive study of Makhno based on the full range of available sources. As a result, a number of questions persist. Was Makhno a military dictator, as his detractors maintain? A bandit and counterrevolutionary, as Soviet writers describe him? A "primitive rebel," in Eric Hobsbawm's phrase?⁷ Was he an incurable drunkard? An anti-intellectual? An anti-Semite? A pogromist? How critical were his military efforts in saving the Revolution from the Whites? Did his unsophisticated equipment and tactics doom him to defeat before a centralized professional army? How successful were his attempts to establish local self-management in the villages and towns of the Ukraine? What do we really know about him? How much is myth and fantasy, how much incontrovertible fact?

To answer these questions, one must come to grips with the underlying question of Makhno's anarchism. According to Emma Goldman, Makhno's object was to establish a libertarian society in the south that would serve as a model for the whole of Russia. Interestingly, Trotsky once noted that he and Lenin had toyed with the idea of allotting a piece of territory to Makhno for this purpose,⁸ but the project foundered when fighting broke out between the anarchist guerrillas and the Bolshevik forces in the Ukraine.

But was Makhno in fact an anarchist, or merely another "primitive" rebel from the southern frontier, harking back to Razin and Pugachev with their vision of Cossack federalism and rough-and-ready democracy? The answer is that he was both. Nor is there any contradiction, for the Cossack-peasant rebellions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries possessed a strong egalitarian and antistatist character, their participants mounting an all-out attack upon the nobility and bureaucracy and detesting the state as an evil tyranny which trampled on popular freedoms. Makhno's anarchism was compatible with these sentiments and with peasant aspirations in general. The peasants wanted the land, and then to be left alone by gentry, officials, tax collectors, recruiting sergeants, and all external agents of authority. These were to be replaced by a society of "free toilers" who, as Makhno expressed it, would "set to work to the tune of free and joyous songs which reflected the spirit of the revolution."⁹

In this sense, Makhno was the very incarnation of peasant anarchism, the partisan leader in closest touch with the most cherished hopes and feelings of the village. He was, in George Woodcock's description, "an anarchist Robin Hood,"¹⁰ a familiar figure in other peasant and artisan societies, notably in Spain and in Italy, where anarchism struck deep and lasting roots. (In Mexico, too, he had his counterparts in Emiliano Zapata and Ricardo Flores Magon.) To his supporters he was a modern Razin or Pugachev, come to rescue the poor from their oppressors and to grant them land and liberty. As in the past, his movement arose in the southern borderlands and was directed against the wealthy and powerful. Makhno, wrote Alexander Berkman, became "the avenging angel of the lowly, and presently he was looked upon as the great liberator, whose coming had been prophesied by Pugachev in his dying moments."¹¹

Following the example of his predecessors, Makhno expropriated the landlords, removed the officials, inaugurated a Cossack-style "republic" on the steppe, and was revered by his followers as their good father. He called on the peasants to rise against the "golden epaulettes" of Wrangel

Makhnovshchina: *Delia insurrezione dei contadini in Ucraina alia rivolta di Cronstadt* (Milan, 1950).

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (New York, 1959), pp. 183-86.

⁸ L. Trotsky, *Stalinism and Bolshevism* (New York, 1937), pp. 22-23.

⁹ Paul Avrich, ed., *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution* (Ithaca, 1973), p. 132.

¹⁰ George Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Cleveland, 1962), p. 419.

¹¹ Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth* (Diary lyzo-iyzz) (New York, 192-5), p. 191.

and Denikin and to fight for free Soviets and communes. At the same time he opposed the "Communists and commissars," just as Razin and Pugachev had opposed the "boyars and officials." The Bolsheviks, for their part, denounced him as a brigand, the epithet with which Moscow had maligned its guerrilla opponents since the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the same legends arose about Makhno as about Razin and Pugachev. As his wife told Emma Goldman, "there grew up among the country folk the belief that Makhno was invincible because he had never been wounded during all the years of warfare in spite of his practice of always personally leading every charge."¹²

There was, however, an important difference. Unlike Razin and Pugachev, and unlike his contemporary "atamans" in the Ukraine, Makhno was motivated by a specific anarchist ideology. Throughout his life he proudly wore the anarchist label as a mark of his opposition to authority. As early as 1906, it has been noted, he joined an anarchist group in Gulyai-Polye. His understanding of anarchism matured during his years in prison, under the tutelage of Arshinov, and was deepened by his contact with Volin, Aaron Baron, and other anarchist intellectuals who joined his movement during the Civil War. Of the older theorists, his main source of inspiration was Kropotkin, to whom he made a pilgrimage in 1918, as mentioned above, but he also strongly admired Bakunin, calling him a "great" and "tireless" rebel, and the stream of leaflets that issued from his camp often bore a Bakuninist flavor.

Makhno's anarchism, however, was not confined to verbal propaganda, important though this was to win new adherents. On the contrary, Makhno was a man of action who, even while occupied with military campaigns, sought to put his anarchist theories into practice. His first act on entering a town -- after throwing open the prisons -- was to dispel any impression that he had come to introduce a new form of political rule. Announcements were posted informing the inhabitants that they were now free to organize their lives as they saw fit, that his Insurgent Army would not "dictate to them or order them to do anything." Free speech, press, and assembly were proclaimed, although Makhno would not countenance organizations that sought to impose political authority, and he accordingly dissolved the Bolshevik revolutionary committees, instructing their members to "take up some honest trade."¹³

Makhno's aim was to throw off domination of every type and to encourage economic and social self-determination. "It is up to the workers and peasants," said one of his proclamations in 1919, "to organize themselves and reach mutual understanding in all areas of their lives and in whatever manner they think right." With his active support, anarchistic communes were organized in Ekaterinoslav province, each with about a dozen households totaling one hundred to three hundred members. There were four such communes in the immediate vicinity of Gulyai-Polye, Makhno's base of operations, and a number of others were formed in the surrounding districts. (Makhno himself, when time permitted, labored in one of the Gulyai-Polye communes.)

Each commune was provided with as much land as its members were able to cultivate without hiring additional labor. The land, as well as the tools and livestock, was allotted by decision of the Regional Congresses of Peasants, Workers, and Insurgents, and the management of the commune was conducted by a general meeting of its members. The land was held in common, and kitchen and dining rooms were also communal, though members who wished to cook separately or to

¹² Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*, pp. 148-49. As with Razin and Pugachev, songs about Makhno are still sung in the Soviet Union.

¹³ Volin, *The Unknown Revolution*, p. 631.

take food from the kitchen and eat it in their own quarters were allowed to do so. Though only a few members actually considered themselves anarchists, the peasants operated the communes on the basis of full equality ("from each according to his ability, to each according to his need") and accepted Kropotkin's principle of mutual aid as their fundamental tenet. It is interesting to note that the first such commune, near the village of Pokrovskoye, was named in honor of Rosa Luxemburg, not an anarchist but a Marxist and recent martyr in the German revolution, a reflection of Makhno's undoctinaire approach to revolutionary theory and practice.

In his efforts to reconstruct society along libertarian lines, Makhno also encouraged experiments in workers' self-management whenever the occasion offered. For example, when the railway workers of Aleksandrovsk complained that they had not been paid for many weeks, he advised them to take control of the railroad and charge the users what seemed a fair price for their services. Such projects, though they call for a closer examination by historians, were of limited success. They failed to win over more than a minority of workers, for, unlike the farmers and artisans of the village, who were independent producers accustomed to managing their own affairs, factory hands and miners operated as interdependent parts of a complicated industrial machine and floundered without the guidance of technical specialists. Furthermore, the peasants and artisans could barter the products of their labor, whereas the workers depended on wages for their survival. Makhno, moreover, compounded the confusion when he recognized all paper money issued by his predecessors -- Ukrainian nationalists, Whites, and Bolsheviks alike. He never understood the complexities of an urban economy, nor did he care to understand them. In any event, he found little time to implement his economic programs. He was forever on the move. His army was a "republic on tachanki," as Volin described it, and "the instability of the situation prevented positive work."¹⁴

In the Ukraine in 1918-1920, as in Spain in 1936-1939, the libertarian experiment was conducted amid conditions of civil strife, economic dislocation, and political and military repression. It was therefore unable to endure. But not for want of trying, nor from any lack of devotion to anarchism. Through all Makhno's campaigns a large black flag, the classic symbol of anarchy, floated at the head of his army, embroidered with the slogans "Liberty or Death" and "The Land to the Peasants, the Factories to the Workers." The Cultural-Educational Commission, including Volin, Arshinov, and Baron, edited anarchist journals, issued anarchist leaflets, and delivered lectures on anarchism to the troops. Beyond this, the commission founded an anarchist theater and planned to open anarchist schools modeled on Francisco Ferrer's Escuela Moderna in Spain.

In one area, however, Makhno made a significant compromise with his libertarian principles. As a military leader, it has been noted, he was compelled to inaugurate a form of conscription in order to replenish his forces; and he is known on occasion to have imposed strict measures of military discipline, including summary executions. His violent tendencies, some maintain, were accentuated by bouts with alcohol. Volin underscores Makhno's drinking and carousing nature, and Victor Serge describes him as "boozing, swashbuckling, disorderly and idealistic."¹⁵ Hostile observers have compared him to a Chinese warlord, insisting that his army was libertarian only in name. This, however, is not a true picture. Although military considerations inevitably clashed with Makhno's anarchistic doctrines, his army was more popular both in organization and social composition than any other fighting force of his day.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 633.

¹⁵ Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, p. 161.

By all accounts, Makhno was a military leader of outstanding ability and courage. His achievement in organizing an army and conducting an effective and prolonged campaign is, apart from some of the successes of the Spanish anarchists in the 1930s, unique in the history of anarchism. He inherited a good deal of the Cossack tradition of independent military communities in the south and of their resentment of government encroachments. His guerrilla tactics of ambush and surprise were both a throwback to the Russian rebels of the past and an anticipation of the methods of combat later employed in China, Cuba, and Vietnam. But how critical were his efforts in saving the Revolution from the Whites? Volin flatly asserts that "the honor of having annihilated the Denikinist counter-revolution in the autumn of 1919 belongs entirely to the Makhnovist Insurgent Army." David Footman writes more modestly that "there is some justification for the claim that Peregonovka was one of the decisive battles of the Civil War in the south."¹⁶ In any case, the importance of the battle is beyond dispute.

Makhno, in short, was a thoroughgoing anarchist, who practiced what he preached insofar as conditions permitted. A down-to-earth peasant, he was not a man of words, not a phrasemaker or orator, but a lover of action who rejected metaphysical systems and abstract social theorizing. When he came to Moscow in 1918, he was disturbed by the atmosphere of "paper revolution" among the anarchists as well as the Bolsheviks.¹⁷ Anarchist intellectuals struck him, in the main, as men of books rather than deeds, mesmerized by their own words and lacking the will to fight for their ideals. Nevertheless, he respected them for their learning and idealism and later sought their assistance in teaching his peasant followers the fundamentals of anarchist doctrine.

Makhno's anti-intellectual streak was shared by his mentor Arshinov, a self-educated workman from the Ukraine like his pupil. Arshinov, however, went further. In his *History of the Makhnovist Movement* he not only criticizes the Bolsheviks as a new ruling class of intellectuals, a theory first put forward by Bakunin (speaking of Marx and his associates), developed by Machajski, and restated during the Revolution by Maximoff and other anarchist writers; he expresses contempt for anarchist intellectuals as well, calling them mere theorists who seldom acted but who "slept through" events of unparalleled historical significance and abandoned the field to the authoritarians.¹⁸ This goes far to explain his *Organizational Platform* of 1926, endorsed by Makhno, which castigates do-nothing intellectuals and calls for effective organization and action.¹⁹

This brings us to the vexed question of Makhno's alleged anti-Semitism, which future biographers must subject to careful scrutiny. Charges of Jew-baiting and of anti-Jewish pogroms have come from every quarter, left, right, and center. Without exception, however, they are based on hearsay, rumor, or intentional slander, and remain undocumented and unproved.²⁰ The Soviet propaganda machine was at particular pains to malign Makhno as a bandit and pogromist. But after meticulous research, Elias Tcherikower, an eminent Jewish historian and authority on anti-Semitism in the Ukraine, concluded that the number of anti-Jewish acts committed by the

¹⁶ Volin, *The Unknown Revolution*, p. 625; David Footman, *Civil War in Russia* (London, 1961), p. 276.

¹⁷ Makhno, *Pod udarami kontr-revoliutsii*, p. 93.

¹⁸ Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, p. 242.

¹⁹ *Organizatsionnaia platforma vseobshchego souiza anarkhistov* (Paris, 1926).

²⁰ Makhno himself rejected such charges as "vicious rumors" spread by "political agents or charlatans." *The Road to Freedom*, November 1927. See also Alexander Berkman, "Some Bolshevik Lies about the Russian Anarchists," *Freedom*, April 1922.

Makhnovists was "negligible" in comparison with those committed by other combatants in the Civil War, the Red Army not excepted.²¹

To verify this, I have examined several hundred photographs in the Tcherikower Collection, housed in the YIVO Library in New York and depicting anti-Jewish atrocities in the Ukraine during the Civil War. A great many of these photographs document acts perpetrated by the adherents of Denikin, Petliura, Grigoriev, and other self-styled "atamans," but only one is labeled as being the work of the Makhnovists, though even here neither Makhno himself nor any of his recognizable subordinates are to be seen, nor is there any indication that Makhno had authorized the raid or, indeed, that the band involved was in fact affiliated with his Insurgent Army.

On the other hand, there is evidence that Makhno did all in his power to counteract anti-Semitic tendencies among his followers. Moreover, a considerable number of Jews took part in the Makhnovist movement. Some, like Volin and Baron, were intellectuals who served on the Cultural-Educational Commission, wrote his manifestoes, and edited his journals, but the great majority fought in the ranks of the Insurgent Army, either in special detachments of Jewish artillery and infantry or else within the regular partisan units, alongside peasants and workers of Ukrainian, Russian, and other ethnic origin.

Makhno personally condemned discrimination of any sort, and punishments for anti-Semitic acts were swift and severe: one troop commander was summarily shot after raiding a Jewish town, and a soldier met the same fate merely for displaying a poster with the stock anti-Semitic formula, "Beat the Jews, Save Russia!" Makhno denounced Ataman Grigoriev for his pogroms and had him shot. Had Makhno been guilty of the accusations against him, surely the Jewish anarchists in his camp would have broken with his movement and raised their voices in protest. The same is true of Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and others who were in Russia at the time, and of Sholem Schwartzbard, Volin, Senya Fleshin, and Mollie Steimer in Paris during the 1920s. Far from criticizing Makhno as an anti-Semite, they defended him against the campaign of slander that persisted from all sides.

Finally, the last years of Makhno's life deserve fuller treatment than they have received from historians. Of all the writers to date, Malcolm Menzies and Alexandre Skirda have provided the most satisfactory accounts of this period.²² Yet even they have not told the full and dramatic story of Makhno's escape across the Dniester, his internment in Rumania, his escape to Poland, his arrest, trial, and acquittal, his flight to Danzig, renewed imprisonment and final escape (aided by Berkman and other comrades in Europe),²³ and his ultimate sanctuary in Paris, where he lived his remaining years in obscurity, poverty, and disease, an Antaeus cut off from the soil that might have replenished his strength. According to Berkman, Makhno in Paris dreamed of returning to his native land and "taking up again the struggle for liberty and social justice."²⁴ He had always hated the "poison" of big cities, cherishing the natural environment in which he was born. How ironic that he should have ended his days in a great foreign capital, working in an automobile factory, a restless consumptive for whom drink provided meager relief.

²¹ Volin, *The Unknown Revolution*, pp. 698-700. See also *Man!*, September-October 1934.

²² Malcolm Menzies, *Makhno: Une epopee* (Paris, 1972), pp. 213-52; Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno: Le cosaque de l'anarchie* (Paris, 1982).

²³ Alexander Berkman to Ben Capes, August 25, 1924, Berkman Archive, International Institute of Social History; Berkman to Minna Lowensohn, May 2, 1925, Lowensohn Papers, Avrich Collection, Library of Congress.

²⁴ Quoted in Michael Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918-1921* (Seattle, 1976), p. 243.

Yet he never lost his passion for anarchism, never abandoned the movement to which he had dedicated his life. He attended anarchist meetings (frequenting, among others, the Jewish Auto-didact Club), defended the *Organizational Platform* of his old comrade Arshinov, and mingled with anarchists from all over the world, including a group of Chinese students and also Durruti and Ascaso from Spain, whom he regaled with his adventures in the Ukraine and offered his help when the moment for their own struggle should arrive. Though death intervened to prevent this, it is of interest that a number of veterans of his Insurgent Army did in fact go to fight in the Durruti column in 1936.²⁵ How fitting, then, that the Spanish comrades should have provided financial assistance when Makhno lay mortally ill with tuberculosis.

Makhno's final moments have been movingly conjured by Malcolm Menzies.²⁶ In July 1934, Makhno, forty-four years old, is lying at death's door in a Paris hospital. Overcome by fever, he lapses into semiconsciousness and dreams his last dream, a dream of his beloved countryside, of the open steppe covered with snow, a bright sun in an azure sky, and Nestor Ivanovich seated on his horse, moving in slow motion towards a cluster of mounted comrades waiting in the distance, who touch their caps in greeting at his approach. Time passes, the seasons change, spring arrives -- Germinal! -- the rebirth of hope, a landscape of green, the smell of fresh earth, a murmuring stream, and a fleeting, all too fleeting, glimpse of freedom. And then eternal silence. Makhno's body was cremated and the ashes interred in the Pere-La-chaise Cemetery, not far from the mass grave of Paris Communards who were massacred there in 1871.

Notes

²⁵ Abel Paz, *Durruti: Le peuple en armes* (Paris, 1972), pp. 117-20; L. Mercier Vega, *L'Increvable anarchisme* (Paris, 1970), p. 4.

²⁶ Menzies, *Makhno*, pp. 251-52. Excepted from *Anarchist Portraits* by Paul Avrich. Taken from <http://www.ditext.com/avrich/7.html>

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